

Becoming bilingual opens up a whole new world of different people, different cultures, and different emotions. It also takes a huge time commitment—one that many of us can't dedicate to. But what if fluency was only 90 days away?

The Benefits of Bilingualism

Learning a second language has many cognitive benefits. For example, it has been shown to delay Alzheimer's, boost brainpower, reduce cognitive biases, and even increase concentration and the ability to tune out distractions. But, more so than cognitive effects, the ability to speak a second language has a ton of social benefits. There's bliss in having the ability to order food in the waiter's native language, to eavesdrop on people in an elevator, or to impress natives by speaking with and understanding them.

The coolest thing about learning your second language is that it makes learning a third, fourth, or fifth language much easier. The challenge isn't in learning a new language, but rather learning how to learn a language. Once you know the techniques, you'll be able to apply the same grammatical patterns and language techniques in every new language you learn.

Why Most People Are Wrong About Language Learning

I studied Spanish for several years in high school, and even got good grades on national exams. But one day, when I actually tried to speak the language, I suddenly realized: *four years of studying Spanish in school, and I couldn't even order a burrito*. So what went wrong? According to official standardized tests, I was an expert in Spanish. But I couldn't even do the most basic of tasks!

The fact is that we are not taught languages in the ideal way. Students study languages in huge groups and think that a few worksheets and grammar exercises will be enough to learn a language. Yet almost no one actually learns to speak. In actuality, by doing worksheets, we are practicing for just that—doing worksheets. But if you want to learn to speak, well, you actually have to practice by speaking.

So when people try to learn to speak a language out of a book, or with Rosetta Stone, I try to show them that they won't achieve their goals that way. If you want to speak, you have to practice speaking. And if you want to speak a language rapidly, well, you have to start speaking. A lot.

The Basic Strategy Of Rapid Language Learning

Learning a language can seem daunting, so I'm going to provide an overview of the general strategy, before we get into the specifics.

Here is the breakdown:

1. **Get the right resources for learning:** A grammar book, memorization software, and films/books.
2. **Get a private tutor.** You want one for at least a month. I recommend four hours/day.

3. **Attempt to speak and think only in the new language.** Every time you can't remember a word, put that word into your memorization software. Practice your vocabulary daily.
4. **Find friends, language partners, and other speakers of the language.** Once you can have basic conversations with your private tutor, you need to find other partners. If you haven't already, think about moving to the country where the language is spoken. Consider a group class. Practice continuously. Stop speaking English.

That's the basic strategy. Again, this strategy is intensive, because learning a language in three months is a difficult task. If you'd prefer to learn the language more slowly or you don't have the ability to move to a new country and practice 4-8 hours a day, then you can modify the plan. It is extremely important that you practice every day, however—20 minutes a day is much better than once or twice a week.

The Resources You Need To Learn A Language

In order to learn a language, you'll need some items that you can practice with. Here are the resources I always use.

A good grammar book. This is essential if you want to learn a language. I recommend [Dover's Essential Grammar series](#): the books are very cheap, concise, and thorough.

A phrase book. This is similar to a dictionary, but for phrases. You can start memorizing full sentences and phrases, and you'll naturally learn the individual words. I'll talk more about memorization tactics shortly.

An online dictionary. For most romance languages, I recommend [Word Reference](#). For German, try [Dict.cc](#). [Google Translate](#) can be useful, but it easily becomes a crutch. Use it sparingly.

A memorization app. You have to memorize vocabulary. I always put new words in my app, and practice them every [night](#). If you're on a Mac, check out the app [Genius](#). It uses time-spacing techniques to test our knowledge. You'll randomly be quizzed on words or phrases you are trying to learn, and the more often you make a mistake, the more often you'll be tested. I recommend you put English on the left column and your desired language on the right, so that you'll learn to speak in a new language, not translate from it. If you're on a PC, I've heard good things about [Anki](#).

A tutor. I highly recommend getting an in-person private tutor through Craigslist or a nearby language school. However, if you can't find anyone in your area or they are too expensive, check out [Edufire](#). Edufire is a website that allows you to take private and group classes online over the Internet.

Free language partners. The Mixxer is an incredible resource. It's a site that allows you to connect, via Skype, with language partners all over the world. Just choose your native language, and what you are trying to learn, and The Mixxer will find partners with opposite needs (who speak your target language and want to learn your native language).

At the beginning, online partners are a big help. Why? First, because chatting is much easier than speaking, so you get a chance to practice your language. Second, chat gives you a log of what you've been saying—and it makes it easier for your partner to correct you.

I use Couchsurfing.org and Meetup.com to find language partners and language meetups, no matter where I live. Check out Benny's article to learn about finding language partners through Couchsurfing. I don't recommend Rosetta Stone. Rosetta Stone is incredibly slow. In Level 1, which takes 1-2 months to complete, you'll only be familiar with the present tense. This is not a good use of your time.

The 90 Day Plan to Learning a Language

It's possible to achieve fluency, or at least a high speaking level, in just 90 days, but it requires intense focus. The biggest shift was in mindset: I had to change my self conception from 'Maneesh: a blogger who wants to learn Italian' to 'Maneesh: Italian learner (who blogs in his extra time)'. If you don't have the freedom to focus fulltime on learning a language, that's okay, but the process will take longer than 90 days. Just make sure that you continue to practice every day, or else you'll lose your knowledge rapidly.

Days 1-30

The first thirty days are critical to learning a new language. You need to immerse yourself as fully as possible. I highly recommend moving to a country where the language is spoken if you want to learn a language in 90 days. This will help you get into the language learning mindset, and will allow you to surround yourself with the new language. If you are able to move to a new country, try to live with a host family. You'll learn a lot by eating meals with a family that hosts you.

In any case, during the first month, work one on one with a private tutor—not group classes. Group classes allow you to sit back and be lazy, while a private tutor forces you to learn.

This is important: you must be an active learner. Most people allow themselves to be taught to, but you have to take an active role in asking questions. The best way to understand this process is via video—part of the video series I made to supplement this post includes a sample of a class I took while studying Swedish, with explanations of the questions I ask during private training. Check out the language learning videos I've made for this post [here](#).

You're going to start encountering a lot of words and phrases that you don't know, both with your private tutor, and when you practice languages on your own. Enter these words in your memorization software.

You want to start memorizing 30 words and phrases per day. Why 30? Because in 90 days, you'll have learned 80% of the language.

This great article talks about the number of words in the Russian language.

the 75 most common words make up 40% of occurrences
the 200 most common words make up 50% of occurrences
the 524 most common words make up 60% of occurrences
the 1257 most common words make up 70% of occurrences
the 2925 most common words make up 80% of occurrences
the 7444 most common words make up 90% of occurrences
the 13374 most common words make up 95% of occurrences
the 25508 most common words make up 99% of occurrences

As you can see, you need to learn around 3000 to hit 80% of the words...probably enough before you can start learning words easily by context. At 30 words/day, you'll have learned almost 3000 in 90 days.

Days 31-60

After your first month, it's time to focus on exposing yourself to the language as much as possible. After a month of private tutoring, you'll have the ability to have basic conversations.

If your private tutor is getting expensive, you might consider doing advanced group classes at this point—it'll save you money and give you access to other friends who are learning the language. Just be careful of speaking only in English. Try to make it a rule to speak in the new language as much as possible. Continue with your private tutor, if possible.

Now is the time to start finding language partners. Check out The Mixxer and Couchsurfing to find people who speak the language you want to learn. Attempt to spend a few hours everyday practicing your language. At this point, because you have a basic grasp of the language, it shouldn't be a chore—you are basically spending time socializing with new friends.

Try reading simple books in your target language and underlining words that you don't know. You can add these to your memorization app.

You should start trying to think in the new language. Every time you try to express a thought to yourself, but can't remember the word, write it down in your memorization software. Continue learning 30 words and phrases per day.

Days 61-90

By day 60, you should be in a good position to speak the language. You just simply need to keep practicing. Have deeper conversations with your language partners. Continue studying 30 words a day and practicing the ones you've already learned, and you'll be approaching the 3000 word mark—enough to speak a language close to fluently.

By now, you can start watching TV and reading books in your target language. Rent some DVDs in the foreign language and try to follow along. If you need to, turn on the subtitles. Don't worry if you have trouble, because understanding film is a lot more difficult than having a one-on-one conversation.

Keep on working on the language for several hours per day, and by the end of the month, you'll find that you have a good grasp on the language. It's pretty amazing what you can do in just 90 days with intense focus.

[How to Learn a Language in 90 Days](#) | Zen Habits

How to Learn Any Language in 3 Months [456 Comments](#)

Written by [Tim Ferriss](#) Topics: [Language](#)

The Okano Isao judo textbook I used to learn Japanese grammar.

Post reading time: 15 minutes.

Language learning need not be complicated.

Principles of cognitive neuroscience and time management can be applied to attain conversational fluency (here defined as 95%+ comprehension and 100% expressive abilities) in 1-3 months. Some background on my language obsession, from an [earlier post on learning outside of classes](#):

From the academic environments of Princeton University (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Italian) and the Middlebury Language Schools (Japanese), to the disappointing results observed as a curriculum designer at Berlitz International (Japanese, English), I have sought for more than 10 years to answer a simple question: **why do most language classes simply not work?**

The ideal system — and progression — is based on three elements in this order...

- 1. Effectiveness (Priority)**
- 2. Adherence (Interest)**
- 3. Efficiency (Process)**

Effectiveness, adherence, and efficiency refer to the “what”, “why”, and “how” of learning a target language, respectively. In simple terms, you first decide what to learn, based on usage frequency (priority); you then filter materials based on your likelihood of continued study and review, or adherence (interest); lastly, you determine how to learn the material most efficiently (process).

Let's cover each in turn. This post will focus on vocabulary and subject matter. For learning grammar, I suggest you [read this short article](#). For “reactivating” forgotten languages — like high school Spanish — [this sequence](#) will do the trick.

Effectiveness: If you select the wrong material, it does not matter how you study or if you study — practical fluency is impossible without the proper tools (material). [Teachers are subordinate to materials](#), just as cooks are subordinate to recipes.

Adherence: Review, and multiple exposures to the same material, will always present an element of monotony, which must be countered by an interest in the material. Even if you select the most effective material and efficient method, if you don't adhere with repeated study, effectiveness and efficiency mean nothing. In other words: can you persist with the material and method you've chosen? If not, less effective materials or methods will still be better. The best approach means nothing if you don't use it.

By analogy, if sprinting uphill with bowling balls in each hand were the most effective way to lose body fat, how long would the average person adhere to such a program?

If you have no interest in politics, will you adhere to a language course that focuses on this material? Ask yourself: Can I study this material every day and adhere until I reach my fluency goals? If you have any doubt, change your selection. Oftentimes, it is best to select content that matches your interests in your native language. Do not read about something that you would not read about in English, if English is your native language (e.g. don't read Asahi Shimbun if you don't read newspapers in English). Use the target language as a vehicle for learning more about a subject, skill, or cultural area of interest.

Do not use material incongruent with your interests as a vehicle for learning a language – it will not work.

Efficiency: It matters little if you have the best material and adherence if time-to-fluency is 20 years. The ROI won't compel you. Ask yourself: Will this method allow me to reach accurate recognition and recall with the fewest number of exposures, within the shortest period of time? If the answer is no, your method must be refined or replaced.

An Example of Effectiveness (80/20) in Practice

Pareto's Principle of 80/20 dictates that 80% of the results in any endeavor come from 20% of the input, material, or effort.

We can adapt this principle and prioritize material based on its recorded likelihood and frequency of usage. To understand 95% of a language and become conversational fluent may require 3 months of applied learning; to reach the 98% threshold could require 10 years. There is a point of diminishing returns where, for most people, it makes more sense to acquire more languages (or other skills) vs. add a 1% improvement per 5 years.

To see exactly how I deconstruct the grammar of new languages, I suggest you read [“How to Learn \(But Not Master\) Any Language in 1 Hour”](#). Now, on to the meat and potatoes of communication: words.

If you were a student of English (though the list can be adapted to most languages), the following words would deliver the greatest ROI per hour invested for the initial 1-3 weeks of study:

[How to Successfully Learn a New Language This Year](#)

Until the age of 21, I had several New Year's resolutions to learn Spanish that never panned out. After I graduated university (as an electronic engineer who could only speak English) I managed to spend an entire six months living in Spain without picking up more than just a few phrases. I was tackling it the way I imagine way too many people are tackling their learn-a-language resolution this year. Today, I'm a [successful language learner myself](#), having studied over two dozen languages. I'm able to speak half of them well and about eight of them genuinely fluently. Hopefully some suggestions here will make sure you don't make the same mistakes I made in my first years of doing it totally wrong!

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Be Specific in What You're Aiming For

I find that the biggest problem is the vague or impossible goal itself dragging people down before you even get started. Many people phrase their resolution as "Learn Spanish/French/Japanese" without any qualifiers. What does "Learn Chinese" even mean? Learn it to sound like a native? To order food? To write it? And by when?

What you absolutely need to do is **be as specific as possible, both in your target and in your timeline**. And make it something absolutely achievable and within a few months from now.

How about you aim to be *conversational in six months*? Or *be able to ask directions in three weeks*? Or *talk about your life and your work in two months*? Or *order food in the language by the end of the month*? You can aim for an achievable goal within a few months first, rather than working without a good plan of action for when you can "some day" get mistaken for a native speaker. Be specific and realistic about what you want and when you want it.

Expand

Stop Thinking of it Academically—The Only "Failure" is Not Doing Anything

A language is *not* an academic topic that you can pass or fail, but a means of communication. There is no "failure" here, just various degrees of success when you can use that language. **Do NOT aim for perfection-or-bust**. Even a small success of being able to buy lunch in the language, with bad grammar and not using precisely the right word, is something worth being proud of.

You Can Learn to Speak Well Before You Ever Go To the Country

To really prove to people that you don't need to go to the country to successfully learn a language, I decided to prepare for my upcoming trip to Egypt by spending the last three months

immersed in Egyptian Arabic, while hundreds of miles deep inside Brazil. Here is my [two month point](#), and if you [subscribe to my blog](#), you'll see subtitled videos of me using the language with natives while in the country. To prepare for this, **I had specific goals, accepted making mistakes as OK, and spoke with natives every day via Skype**. I definitely won't lie to you and say that it was easy. I worked really hard and had to feel like an idiot a lot of the time, but it was worth all the struggles and time invested, because now I'm ready to discover this wonderful culture.

Focus on Your Priorities in That Language

Once you have a decent roadmap of where you want to be and when, it's important to focus your time and energy on where your priorities lie. This is why it's simply not possible to describe that "one perfect method" to learn any language that applies to "everybody". As an example, my focus is simple: **I want to be able to converse and have real friendships in the language with native speakers**. This may seem obvious as a universal goal that every language learner could have, but realistically it isn't, or at least it *isn't* the absolute priority.

Some people are more passionate about literature in the language, reading comic books / manga, enjoying movies, writing letters, or even learning grammar and the technical workings of various languages. For each of these types of people, I recommend **diving into the very things they are so passionate about right from the start**. Immerse yourself in that, and it will make other aspects of the language much easier when you come back to them later.

Since my focus is speaking, as I'm a very active traveler (over ten entire years on the road so far, which has been [one hell of an education](#) about the world) this means that my priority is speaking. After I succeed in doing this specific aspect of it pretty well, learning to read and write and even work professionally in the language becomes so much more achievable, even for someone like me who barely passed languages in school.

Expand

Recommendations For Those with Spoken Priorities

If your main priority is to converse with natives, then please don't lock yourself away alone in a room with a dusty old book. **You must speak with real people *right now*, and ideally every single day for at least a half an hour**. Anything else you do should serve the main purpose of preparing for those spoken sessions. I study too of course, but that study is for today's spoken session, not for six months or two years down the road when I'm finally "ready" to use it. No matter what, you'll always be missing a few words or have some other aspect to improve on—accept this from the start and get cracking on using the language for real!

If you are not in the country right now, or don't have access to native speakers nearby, two **completely free** resources that I especially like for this are [italki](#) (connect with my profile [here](#)) and [Verbling](#). italki lets you schedule a language exchange with someone wanting to learn your language, who is confirmed to be patient and helpful. Verbling lets you be more spontaneous about it, with random connections with native speakers in a chat-roulette style.

Remember: because you're both learning, **it's OK to make mistakes!** In fact, you should embrace making mistakes, because this is an essential part of learning any language.

A Few More Resources to Help You Progress Quickly

If you live in a major city that has a good international crowd, [Meetup.com](#) has many regular language specific gatherings, and I've actually found that [Couchsurfing](#), a site usually associated with budget travel, has one of the most excellent per-language and per-city social searches to get in touch with natives.

Apart from one-on-one time with people, the resources that I use between spoken sessions to prepare and learn better include:

- [Anki](#): a flashcard app for the iPhone (paid in iTunes or free on jailbroken iPhones in Cydia) and Android (free). An open database of pre-made decks cover many excellent word lists you can download in advance.
- [Memrise](#): the vocabulary lists on this site include memory cues with their words, to give you tricks and mnemonics to make it much less likely you'll forget the words.
- Native content: Try an active [language learning forum](#) to ask for the best news sites or blogs for the language or dialect you are most interested in. One trick I like to do is flick through the top 100 sites by traffic in [Alexa's per country list](#), to see what sites those in that country genuinely check out regularly. For instance, there is a Spanish equivalent of Reddit called [Menéame](#) popular in Spain with tons of great articles to read every day. [Stumbleupon](#) also has a language setting to find random nice content in a bunch of languages, tailored to your interests, and you can [change your computer](#) and software interface languages too.

Your learning approach naturally adapts to your priorities, which is the opposite of what most one-size-fits-all courses seem to aim for. You have great power to succeed in your language learning project this year. Work hard, adapt your learning approach to your priorities, make it about using your language rather than studying it, and you will get results!

I Learned to Speak Four Languages in a Few Years: Here's How

Lifehacker reader Gabriel Wyner was tasked with learning four languages in the past few years for his career as an opera singer, and in the process landed on "a pretty damn good method for language learning that you can do in limited amounts of spare time." Here's the four-step method that you can use, too (and you don't have to invest hundreds in a language course like Rosetta Stone).

This is the method I've used to learn four languages (Italian, German, French and now Russian); it's the method that got me to [C1 fluency](#) in French in about 5 months, and I'm currently using it with Russian (and plan on reaching C1 equivalent fluency by September).

I go in four stages. The stages will take different amounts of time for different languages and depend on how much time you have available per day, naturally. The US Foreign Service Institute makes [estimates for language difficulties](#) for native English speakers, and they seem to be spot on in terms of comparative difficulty—Russian seems to be taking twice as long as French did for me, and they estimate languages like Chinese to take twice as long as Russian. That being said, let's say we're talking about a language like French, and you have 30-60 minutes a day to spend on it, I've included estimates for how long each stage might take.

Stage 1: Learn the correct pronunciation of the language.

Time: 1-2 weeks (or longer for languages that have a new alphabet that will take some time to get comfortable with)

Starting with pronunciation first does a few things—because I'm first and foremost learning how to hear that language's sounds, my listening comprehension gets an immediate boost before I even start traditional language learning. Once I start vocabulary training, I retain it better because I'm familiar with how words should sound and how they should be spelled. (Correct spellings in French, for example, are much easier to remember when there's a connection between the spelling and the sound), and once I finally start speaking to native speakers, they don't switch to English for me or dumb down their language, which is awesome sauce.

If you're learning a language with a different alphabet, this is where you learn the phonetic alphabet(s) (Kana, for Japanese or Pinyin for Chinese, for example).

How do you learn pronunciation?

There are a few routes here, and a lot of excellent online and in-print resources (Pronunciation guides with CDs or mp3s are usually very good). Personally, I think it's worth the (short) time to learn the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for the English language first ([Wikipedia](#) / [some video tutorials I've been producing](#)), and then see what sounds are different in your target language. In the process of learning IPA, you learn the components of each vowel and consonant

and you'll really understand what makes a French word sound French, and a Chinese word Chinese.

Stage 2: Vocabulary and grammar acquisition, no English allowed.

Time: About 3 months. This stage involves two different time commitments: building your vocabulary and grammar flashcards and reviewing the deck.

This stage takes advantage of a few valuable tricks:

First, I'm using [Anki](#), a wonderful, free flashcard program that runs on smartphones and every computer platform. Anki is a spaced repetition system, which schedules reviews of flash cards based upon how often you've successfully remembered a card. In the end, it helps you put a huge number of facts in to your long-term memory very rapidly—you can typically learn 20-30 new words a day in about 30 minutes on your smartphone.

Second, I use a modified version of Middlebury College's famous [language pledge](#)—No English allowed! I use pictures and whatever limited vocabulary I have to build the rest of my vocabulary. By skipping the English, I'm practicing thinking in the language directly, and not translating every time I try to think of a word. This results in quicker learning and better vocabulary retention over time, and a much faster transition to comfortable fluency in the language.

Third, I'm using frequency lists to guide my vocabulary acquisition. These lists show the most common words in a given language, and learning those words first will be the best use of your time—after 1000 words, you'll know 70% of the words in any average text, and 2,000 words provides you with 80% text coverage. It's not enough for fluency, but it's a pretty phenomenal base!

Since I'm starting out with zero words, I have to go in a few steps:

- To save time, I start with a [basic list of 400 words](#) that are common in English and extremely easy to picture - things like man and woman, dog and cat, to run and to cook, etc. I find good (!) translations of these and put them in my Anki deck without any English - just the word and its picture.
- After those, I grab [a frequency list](#) and mark off any remaining words I can portray with pictures alone (basic nouns and verbs), and put them in my Anki deck. Once I have some words to play with, I start putting them together. I use Google translate (Exception to no English rule - just be careful there's no English in your Anki deck) and a grammar book to start making sentences, then get everything double-checked at [lang-8.com](#) before putting them into my Anki deck. Fill-in-the-blank flashcards let you drill your grammar and connecting words, and you can usually just type these straight into Anki from your grammar book.
- As vocab and grammar grow, I eventually move to monolingual (French - French, for example) dictionaries and writing my own definitions for more abstract words (again doublechecked at lang-8.com). This builds on itself; the more vocab and grammar you get, the more vocab and grammar concepts you can describe in the target language. Eventually you can cover all the

words in a 2000 word frequency list as a foundation and add any specific vocab you need for your own interests.

- Most people's eventual goals (by, say, the end of stage 4) will be ~2000-6000 words, plus around 1000 grammar cards, depending on how far you want to go (Here, we're talking about words that are in your Anki deck - you'll pick up a bigger passive vocabulary from reading). As a very rough estimate, if you end up with ~5000 cards, it will take you a bit less than 6 months to learn them with Anki if you're doing 30 minutes a day (half that if you do 60 minutes/day).

Stage 3: Listening, writing and reading work

Time: This stage overlaps quite a bit with stage 2 and 4. Once you're comfortable reading or writing anything, usually a month or two into stage 2, you can start stage 3. Stages 3 and 4, the immersion part, combined took me about 7 fairly insane weeks where I spent any free time reading, watching TV, and writing.

Once I have a decent vocabulary and familiarity with grammar, I start writing essays, watching TV shows and reading books, and talking (at least to myself!) about the stuff I see and do. Every writing correction gets added to the Anki deck, which continues to build my vocab and grammar.

You should read and watch anything that's enjoyable to you—it's more about quantity than anything; I'm a big fan of the Harry Potter series in translation, and dubbed versions of the TV series 24 are insanely addictive and not that difficult to follow after the first few hours—you can literally spend all day in front of the TV, and it's actually productive! As for writing, you can (and should) write whatever you want—journals, opinions, what you did today, your grocery list, anything. The goal is to get something down on a page that you can submit to lang-8.com, get a correction, and put that correction into your Anki deck.

Stage 4: Speech

At the point where I can more or less talk (haltingly, but without too many grammar or vocab holes) and write about most familiar things, I find some place to immerse in the language and speak all the time (literally). No English allowed or else you won't learn the skill you're trying to learn, which is adapting to holes in your grammar or vocabulary by going around them rapidly and automatically without having to think about it). I prefer [Middlebury college](#), but if you don't have 7 solid weeks where you can cut ties to the rest of the world and just speak the language, you'll still get a lot from even a couple of weeks in your target country as long as you stick to your target language and spend as much time as you can talking. There are internet exchanges and Skype videochats that will absolutely help you practice speaking, and if you surround yourself with foreign language TV and movies, read books and videochat with people frequently, you can sort of simulate the immersion experience on your own.

The more intense you can make it, the faster your brain will adapt and learn how to put all the info you learned in stages 1-3 together quickly enough to turn into comfortable, fluent speech.

About Gabriel Wyner: "I am an opera singer, and part of my job involves singing in Italian, French, German, English, and Russian (and sometimes Czech, Spanish, Hebrew and Latin). After several unsuccessful language learning attempts, I tried my first immersion program in German in 2004 and got hooked. Since then, I set out to see if I could become fluent in all of these languages. I've gotten through German, French, and Italian and I'm aiming for fluency in Russian by September. I'm currently living and singing in Vienna, Austria, where I've been teaching English using these methods and have recently finished a book on language learning. The companion website is at www.TowerofBabelfish.com, where these ideas are described in a bit more detail."

Next post: [My next mission: Become Brazilian in 3 months!](#)

How to speak a language pretty well, starting from scratch, in just two months

Want to speak Spanish well, speak French well, speak German well, or any language for that matter? If I can do this with **Czech** starting from zero, imagine what you can do!

I'd like to summarise everything I've discussed on the site regarding my first intensive language experiment, before I move on to my next one. Feel free to click the links to read more into depth about each point, as this article also links to all articles over the last 3 months.

[Edit: this post is just a summary of some ideas I apply when learning languages. For a much more in-depth explanation, check out the [Language Hacking Guide!](#)]

I was [initially aiming](#) for [fluency](#) in 3 months, but unfortunately I had to [stop short](#) at just two months. Even so, after those [two months](#) I could hold a pretty good natural conversation with locals about a range of topics and my [spoken accent](#) in [Czech](#) was quite good. Of course, you can apply these methods to any language. Presuming you can learn a language in the country where it is spoken, this is what I would suggest that you do:

Before going

When starting to learn a language, make sure you have the [right attitude](#) to it; an optimistic viewpoint is essential and half of the battle in progressing in a language. Also, you should clearly define your [motivations](#) to learn that language and keep them in mind throughout the learning process. Try to get as much frustrating study work out of the way as you can in your home

country; **especially phrases and vocabulary**; this will allow you to take advantage of the country and locals themselves for practise. I actually started learning in the foreign country itself this summer, but it can be extremely intimidating for many people without preparation before going.

Get yourself an inexpensive [phrasebook](#) to keep in your pocket/purse to take out and study in little 2-minute windows during the day whenever you have to wait. There are actually lots of ways to [squeeze more time](#) out of your day and it all adds up quickly! Make sure to use fun [memory techniques](#) to not forget all of those new words you are learning. Grammar is important, but unlike many linguists, I believe that it should be taken in very light chunks, and even partially ignored, in the early stages. In my personal opinion, focussing on grammar too much in the early stages is a huge mistake in the academic approach. The priority is to speak as much as possible and you need words and phrases for this, not rules. Study grammar after you can communicate a little and it will be much more interesting and help you “tidy up” what you’ve got.

If you’d like to practise the language before travelling, then [use Couchsurfing](#) to host natives of the language, who will be more than happy to help you! As a bridge to learning the language that you wish to learn, you can also try to learn [Esperanto](#) first, which you can practise in your home country and it can help you get used to the feeling of speaking another language, without worrying about complicated grammar and vocabulary, or being intimidated by the thought of speaking with natives.

In the country

By far, the most important advice I have given this summer (and the “secret” of how I can actually learn languages) is to [not speak English](#). Please don’t take this lightly. Depending on how serious you are about reaching the best level you can, this decision can make all of the difference. It is extremely hard because it can be very lonely and frustrating not being able to communicate all that you want when there may be so many other expats around ready to chat with you in your native-tongue, but I have to warn you that frankly I’ve met hundreds of aspiring learners who have failed in making much progress because of using English as the language that they socialise in. Lots of people learn languages very well while also speaking English in their spare time, but in my experience they do it **much slower** than those who are 100% dedicated.

This is why I can learn languages so quickly, and has nothing to do with magical or genetic talents. Not speaking English is a decision you have to make as soon as possible if you want to learn as quickly as possible. [Don’t wait until you are “ready”](#), because you may never consider yourself ready. Just speak! If you remember some [conversational connectors](#) you can “fake” actual conversations with natives, even in the early stages.

As you are trying to make progress in the language, to help with your longer-term goal, try to have [mini-goals](#) that you can achieve in a very short time. This improves your motivation to study and helps you progress in measurable amounts. One of them is to look forward to a particular meeting with a native and to study for that, but if you find that some natives prefer to

speak to you in English, there are [lots of ways to convince them](#) to help you. But when you are socialising with them, keep in mind that you [don't need to drink](#) to be able to speak the language.

Other observations

When learning the language with a computer handy, you can use [Google Image instead of a dictionary](#) and use Google itself to [correct your grammar](#). Note that to be able to travel to another country, [you don't have to be rich](#). With [my background](#) I managed to get work as an Internet-based [freelance translator](#), but there are plenty of ways to be able to travel continuously or fund your language learning adventure. Try not to take it too seriously and have fun with your language! (See how much fun I was having with [Italian](#) for example?)

Thanks to those of you who have followed my first experiment; in just over 3 months, this blog has reached 400 subscribers, was [nominated for top language blogs](#) and achieved an impressive 6th place and you have all joined in and contributed to the posts with an impressive 456 comments (at the time of writing). But please don't be shy and always feel free to join in to say anything that's on your mind after reading. I hope you will find my next experiment as interesting; I'll introduce it in the next post (have I built up enough curiosity for it yet? 😊)

If you have any tips to add, or if you have any topics or questions that you would really like me to write a post about in the next months then just leave a comment below (several posts this summer were inspired by comments!) Any questions about this summary or individual posts will always be welcome too!

Enter your email in the top right of the site to subscribe to the Language Hacking League e-mail list for way more tips sent directly to your inbox!

If you enjoyed this post, you will love my TEDx talk! You can get much better details of how I recommend learning a language [if you watch it here](#).

This article was written by [Benny Lewis](#)

Comments: *If you liked this post or have anything to say, please leave a comment! I love reading them 😊*

Just keep in mind that I'll delete any rude, trolling, spammy, irrelevant or way off-topic comments. Also, use your REAL name, not a brand or business one, and don't link to your site in the comments unless it's relevant to this post.

If you have a general language learning question, please ask it [in the forums](#). Otherwise please use the search tool on the right for any other question not related to this post.

How to Learn A Language: 5 Hacks to Learning German in 3 Months

21/02/2013

in [Make Money](#), [Productivity](#)

-
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[Editor's Note: This guest post was written by Brian Kwong, who is currently developing a language learning app, [Genius+](#)]



Living in a foreign country does not mean that you will magically speak a new language.

I am a living proof of this, since my wife Julia and I moved to Austria almost two years ago.

I couldn't speak any German because I resisted to learn German while living in Austria.

Until Julia, my father-in-law (Papa), and I went on an *epic* 8-day, 96-mile hike, climbing 9,186 feet through the Austrian Alps (*at right*).

Since Papa cannot speak a word of English, Julia was doing all the translation during the entire hiking trip. I just thought that it was not very cool on my part.

Even though Papa took me to a torture museum the first time I met him 8 years ago, he had accepted me, a Chinese American, into his traditional Austrian family with open arms.

So by the end of our hiking trip, **I decided that it was finally time for me to learn German.**

After I came home from the trip, I started doing research on what is the best and fastest way to learn a new language.

Fortunately, I saw Tim Ferriss' tweet:



The tweet lead me to Zenhabit’s [“How to Learn a Language in 90 Days”](#), a guest post written by Maneesh Sethi, and it inspired me to take on the [“Learn German in 3 Months Challenge”](#)!

Below are the five hacks that I discovered throughout my challenge and how you can apply them to your language learning, too.

1. The “P&F Stakes” Hack

“Julia, why don’t you tell your dad to pretend to put me in a head lock and then you take a picture? It would be fun and it will motivate me to learn German.”

I said to Julia as we were waiting for the train to get back home after our hiking trip. Julia spoke some German, then Papa got this big grin on his face.

Before I knew it, his giant arm was wrapped around my neck and at the same time, I heard a “pop” sound coming from my neck as he tighten his grip.



My

veins were popping out on my face, Papa wasn't fooling around!

I thought, either Julia did not translate the word “pretend” or Papa completely ignored it because it didn't feel very nice, but at least he had a good time.

After I decided to take on the Learn German in 3 Months Challenge, to make it even more fun and interesting, I told Papa about it. I said that on Day 91, I will have a 15 minute conversation with him in German.

At the end of the conversation, Papa, his wife Gabi, and Julia will judge if I passed the challenge or not. If I did not, I will have to live with Papa and do house work like cleaning the toilet and shoveling snow for a week!

They immediately burst into laughter and kept nodding their heads after Julia's translation.

Little did I know, creating a big enough stake with some pain and fun (P & F) became the driving force and the motivation for me to grind through the ups and downs of learning a new language during my 3 month challenge.

“A goal without real consequences is wishful thinking. Good follow-through doesn't depend on the right intentions. It depends on the right incentives.”

-Tim Ferriss, [*The 4-Hour Chef*](#)

In the Meta Learning section of Tim Ferriss' book [The 4-Hour Chef](#), “stake” is one of the foundations of his four-part formula on how to become world-class in just about anything in six months or less. (We are just adding some P & F sauce on it!)

2. The “Self Diagnostic” Hack

Three months is a very short time to learn a new language from scratch, so everything I do around language learning has to be effective and consistent. About halfway through my challenge, I noticed that I was very consistent with certain tasks but not so consistent with others.

For example, I was consistently showing up on time to meet with my language partners to practice speaking German, but I was not consistently memorizing 30 German phrases a day.



Since learning new phrases and vocabulary is a huge part of learning a new language, I had to figure out how I can get myself to nail 30 phrases every day. I already know that I have amazing Mac software called [Genius](#) that works simply and effectively (and recommended by Maneesh), so the tool is not the problem.

Instead of beating myself up, asking “**Why am I such a lazy ass and not doing the work?**”

I asked, “**Why am I consistently showing up and meeting with my language partners?**”

After some self reflection, I figured out why...because at the end of every meeting, my language partner and I will set up a time for the next meeting. Since I had agreed on a time to meet with my language partner and he is expecting me to be there, I consistently show up and do the work.

The key is, a meeting involves someone else at a specific time, where as memorizing and learning phrases alone on my computer does not. I can do it whenever I want, which usually translates to “later”, meaning “No work gets done.”

Once you self diagnose why you do something consistently without fail, you can then apply this to whatever is not working.

3. The “Ride What Works” Hack

Why I consistently show up to meet my language partners without fail is because:

1. “Someone expects me to be there at a specific time”
2. “I don’t want to let my friends down”

I have more reasons, but these are the biggest two why I show up on time and do the work. So now I needed to find a way to incorporate this diagnostic in my daily memorization routine:

“What fun ways can I come up with, applying these two elements, so I can get my ass to learn and memorize 30 German phrases every day?”

An idea came to mind and I put it into action right away:

I shared what I realized in Hack #2 at 1 min 27 sec. I announced that I will learn and memorize 30 German phrases a day with Genius and broad-cast it LIVE to the public at 9 am everyday.

Here is the first day of me doing this:

(Memorizing starts at 9 min 49 sec)

I was fully aware that the chance of someone watching me to struggle and memorize 30 phrases was very slim, but by putting myself in this position, people expected me to do it.

And who knows, someone may come and check on me at any minute! (1-5 people watched me when I was memorizing and learning everyday!) This is the same psychology as, if you have to perform to an audience who came just to see you everyday, would you show up and do the work? Of course you would!

The result?

I started this 22 days before my conversation with Papa in German and I did it 20 out of 22 days, including Saturday and Sunday...which was a hell of a lot more consistent than the previous 2 months and imagine if I did this from Day 1!

So whatever hacks got you to do the work without fail, be creative and ride it like there is no tomorrow.

4. The “Team Sport” Hack



Relationship is a team sport.

Business is a team sport.

And learning a language is definitely a team sport.

Here is what I mean:

Being married to a German-speaking wife definitely helps but early on in the challenge, I realized that I *cannot* rely on practicing German *only* with Julia.

It was very hard to switch from English to German, because we have been speaking English together for more than 7 years, and listening to a variety of German accents will help me to understand better.

So I jumped on [Mixxer](#) (again recommended by Maneesh!), a free website for language exchanges via Skype on Day 9. After using Mixxer for 5 minutes, I found a language partner from Germany and we started practicing right away!

Below is a step by step video of how I did that:

Practicing speaking German was a big part of the plan and I definitely would not get have gotten very far without my awesome language partners.

Monika is a friend who is a German teacher living close by us in Austria. She watched [our video](#) about why I took on the Learn German in 3 Months Challenge and she was *so* stoked about it, she made EVERY SINGLE ONE of her students watch my video in class. (Poor students!)

12 of her students then created a project to teach me German twice a week in the last month of my challenge to help me accomplish my goal of speaking with Papa on Day 91.



Benny Lewis created this awesome site called [Fluent In 3 Months](#) on unconventional methods of language learning and a really [great forum](#) where people around the world can post and update their progress on their language challenge (He calls it “Language Mission”).

Baron Jon Johnson started the [Zero to Fluent in 90 Days Challenge in Chinese](#) at about the same time as me. Even though I never met him in person, I felt like we climbed a mountain together as a team.

Finally, I wouldn’t have started this challenge if I didn’t see **Tim Ferriss’** tweet, which led me to **Zenhabits** and the “How to Learn a Language in 90 days” post written by **Maneesh**.

Everyone who I mentioned here contributed to my language challenge and were part of my team even if they didn’t know it. Yes, maybe I could have completed the challenge all alone, but there is no doubt that it would have taken *way* more work, my learning would not have been as effective and definitely A LOT more boring if I learned a language all by myself.

Who do you *really* need on your team? For me, two language partners and one teacher to show you how the grammar works.

That’s it!

At the end of the day, our end goal is to use a new language to connect with new **people**, so involving people in your language learning journey will do nothing but wonders for you.

5. The Sh*t Happens Hack

Well, this is not really a hack, it's more like a fact. During the 3 months in my challenge:

Our beloved dog died. Had to fire our programmer. Hired a new programmer. Had an awesome road trip to Germany, met my language partners in person. Got a new puppy in Germany (a lot more work than I thought to raise a puppy!). Didn't feel like learning German on many occasions.

Ups and downs are going to happen no matter what you do during your language challenge or in life, but it's all about setting a goal that is worth your time pursuing. Have tons of fun and enjoy the "highs" on your way to your goal.

And when sh*t hits the fan, use the hacks in this post to help you figure out how to get yourself back on track and continue to turn your worthwhile goal into reality one step at a time.

Before my challenge, I could not speak ANY German. I resisted for 1.5 years *while* living in a German-speaking country.

On Day 91, I had a fun conversation with Papa and I connected with my father in law for the first time ever.

That's priceless.

If I can do this with a language I had no passion for, I have no doubt that you can learn to speak a language you have always wanted to speak in 90 days too =)

Now Over To You!

How will you apply what you learned in this post in your language learning or in your life in 2013? Let us know in the comments below!

About Brian and Julia

Brian and Julia are developing Genius+, an iOS app based on Genius, the Mac software which helped Brian to memorize German phrases in his 3 months challenge. If you would like to help Brian and Julia beta test Genius+ and get updates on language learning tips, you can [sign up here](#).

Resource Section

[How to learn a language in 90 days \(2013\)](#) from [Brian Kwong](#) (a SlideShare presentation)

[The Best Way to Learn a Language in 3 Months](#) (video version of “How to Learn a Language in 90 Days” plus Julia slapping me in the video)

[How to Learn a Language in 90 Days](#) on Zenhabits

How to Get the Most Out of Your Language Partner – Maneesh’s awesome Video Series (Optin in required) *Do you want to use your Zenhabit optin page?*

[Genius](#) – SRS memorization app for Mac

[Genius+](#) – SRS memorization app for iPad and iPhone (in development but you can sign up for beta)

[Fluent In 3 Months](#) by Benny Lewis – unconventional ways of language learning

[Fluent In 3 Months Forum](#) – A great forum where you can get inspiration and support

[Mixxer](#) – a free website for language exchanges via skype

[How to find a language partner on Mixxer in 5 Minutes video](#)

[Zero to Fluent in 90 days](#) – Just another regular guy like me who took on a 90 days language challenge in Chinese, if we can do it, you can too =)

[The Next 60 Days](#)

16 Sunday Dec 2012

Posted by [baronjon](#) in [Mandarin Challenge](#), [Zero To Fluent](#)

≈ [4 Comments](#)



Onward and upward. That's my mantra right now. The first 90 days was all about acquiring as much of the Chinese language as I possibly could. I wouldn't classify it as a purely "quantity of quality" stage. But I certainly wasn't seeking to have a perfect level of Chinese by anyone's standard.

I'm very happy with the level I reached in 90 days. But as you may have imagined, I'm hungry for more. So although the next 60 days will still have me acquiring as much "new" Chinese as I possibly can, I will also be seeking to drastically improve the Chinese that I've already learned. That means more of a focus on pronunciation and intonation, more improvement in listening skills etc etc.

Here's the game plan:

Learn to Read above at intermediate Level

90 minutes / Day

I'm basically illiterate right now. I have a passive ability to recognize many characters that I see on a regular basis. But as many will know, recognizing a character doesn't mean you that can read a particular text. I think reading is important part of speaking a language well and as a result, it can't be overlooked. But this will be tough. And since I've been depending on pinyin this entire time, I'll basically be learning characters from scratch.

Listen and Parrot 200 ChinesePod.com podcasts

2 hours / Day

I've done a lot of listening already. But it's mostly been casual. For example, I'll listen to a podcast once or twice, pickup what I can and then move onto the next. To improve my ability to listen and speak , I plan on doing 200 intensive listening sessions in the next 60 days. This will entail me listening very closely and then spending as much time as it takes to parrot that particular dialogue. This will hopefully improve my listening skills because of how intensely I'll be listening. In addition, my pronunciation and intonation should improve through shadowing / parrotting. Hopefully 😊

Speak, Speak, Speak, Think, Think, Think

2 hours / day

Using the language before you master the language is still the most important aspect to learning. I'm going to continue speaking to language partners through Skype as much as possible. In addition I will try to record myself speaking about random topics (book reviews, current news, upcoming movies..) whenever I get a chance. Throughout the day, my goal will be to think in the language as much as possible. There's no real way to measure this, but I still think it's an important step.

Grammar and Vocabulary

90 minutes per day

Learning new words will always be a priority. 10-20 per day will be the official goal that I set for myself. Learning words isn't always tricky, but creating mnemonics so I don't forget them can require a little time.

Here's to the next 60!

[End of 90 Day Challenge!!!! Video](#)

15 Saturday Dec 2012

Posted by [baronjon](#) in [Mandarin Challenge](#)

≈ [2 Comments](#)

Hey Everyone,

So 90 days has come and gone. It seems like I just started this challenge yesterday. Thank you to everyone who watched, read, commented or just followed me along this journey. It has been one of the most enriching things I've ever done and the journey itself has changed the way I view

the world. Nothing I've ever done in such short period of time has ever had this big of impact on me. And if I had to do it over again, I would do it in a heartbeat.

Although the 90 days are done, the learning isn't over. I'm going to continue to work on my Chinese and really being to focus on things like pronunciation, intonation and all the weak parts of my language. After the new year comes, I'm planning to tackle another language in 90 days. (can you guess which one?)

What's next? Before starting my next 90 day language challenge I'm going to spend two or three months improving my Chinese. I hope you'll stick around for the journey. I'll keep this site updated regularly.

Since beginning this challenge, this website has been viewed close to 20,000 times. I did not expect such a response or interest when I first began, but the emails and replies that I got were such a great motivator. There are so many people that help me get this far and I could spend all day saying thank you. But I want to give some recognition to a few people who have been particularly supportive and inspiring.

Nia – Thanks for all the comments! You kept me going. I can't stress how much your thoughts and suggestions influence what I did and didn't do. Thank you

Brian the multilingual evil genius and developer of Genius+ – We started about the same time and it was great to see how far you got. So much advice came from you and I couldn't have made it even this far if I didn't have at least one other person trying the same thing. Keep up the inspiration.

Roman and Senuloj - you guys kept me motivated even when I wanted to stop. Thanks you both a thousand times.

Benny the Irish Polyglot - Thanks for speaking with me. The advice you gave was obviously the catalyst behind me starting. My Chinese is further after 90 days than my Spanish is after 10 years. Thank You

yuxin – You, more than anyone have been the key to my learning. I think i've spent more time talking to you than anyone (English or Chinese) in the last 90 days. Thank you for putting up with my dreadful Chinese and keeping things light and funny along the way.

Baron Jon

[**My Level in Chinese After Just 75 Days of Studying! \(video\)**](#)

28 Wednesday Nov 2012

Posted by [baronjon](#) in [Uncategorized](#)

≈ [4 Comments](#)

[Click here for the video:](#)

I always record my language sessions. It's a great way to look back and see where you need to improve. Since I haven't posted a video in a quite some time, I thought it would be a good idea to [show](#) one of my sessions. I'm actually better at Chinese in regular interactions that I have everyday at work and on the street. Because in regular interactions, I typically use words and patterns that I already know really well. In these lessons, I'm always trying out a new word that I haven't mastered the tone of, or a grammatical structure that I haven't quite nailed yet. Either way, the video was completely unscripted and will show that I'm comfortable talking about random topics. I have a long way to go before I'm speaking the way I would like to, but given the conversations I have on a daily basis, I'm pretty happy with my level after just 75 days. Feel free to leave a comment or correction.

[When Life Happens....](#)

21 *Wednesday* Nov 2012

Posted by [baronjon](#) in [Uncategorized](#)

≈ [3 Comments](#)

Sometimes, Life just happens.... regardless of what plans you have.

The past couple of weeks have been really really rough. Nothing in terms of language learning, but I've had to deal with a couple of rough personal things including the death of a family member.

Thank you to everyone who contacted me to ask how the challenge has been going. This bout has obviously affected the time I've had to study. And it probably could not have come at a more inopportune time.

The plan going forward:

Although I could not put the same time into learning, I continued to practice pretty regularly with friends that I've made while learning the language. This allowed me to continue to improve, albeit at no where near the same pace that I had been on at first. With a little over three weeks left in the mission, I'm going to do my best to dive back in to as close as a normal routine as I possibly can and seen where that takes me.

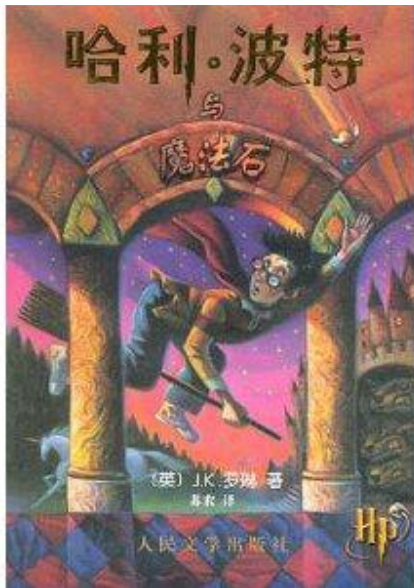
Thanks again for the support.

[Attempting to Read in a Foreign Language](#)

06 *Tuesday* Nov 2012

Posted by [baronjon](#) in [Uncategorized](#)

≈ [8 Comments](#)



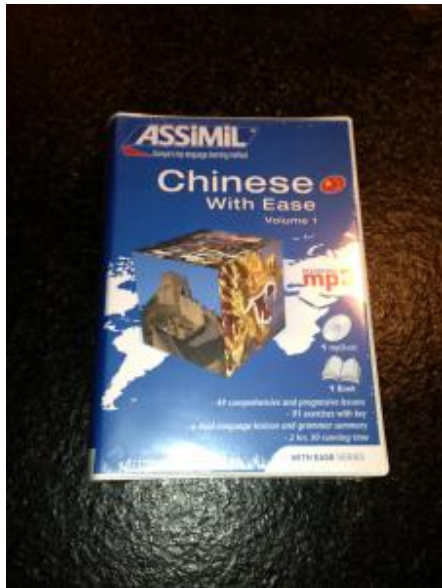
Whenever I focus on learning new vocab, I try to aim for 50 words a day. The hard part isn't remembering the words, I think using mnemonics makes that easier. The hard part is actually finding the right words to focus on. There are many words that I would love to learn one day, but I have to filter my words for now and focus on the one's that I would use on a regular basis. To help improve my listening skills while improving my vocab, I decided to order both the text and audio version of Harry Potter in Chinese. Harry Potter is probably my favorite fictional book series of all time and I'm hoping the familiarity of the story will help with comprehension of the new words. I'm expecting this to be a pretty arduous task since I won't know a lot of the words, and I'm not expecting to finish the book anytime soon at all. In fact, I'd be happy making it through a few chapters if that meant I could pick up some good vocab. I'll be using the pleco app to make looking up words easier. But does anyone here have experience with reading foreign texts? Any advice?

[Let the Shadowing Begin](#)

31 *Wednesday* Oct 2012

Posted by [baronjon](#) in [Mandarin Challenge](#)

≈ [4 Comments](#)



I feel like a kid on Christmas Day! I just received my Chinese with Ease course by Assimil and I can't wait to get started! I've never used this program, but I've heard so many good things from so many people that I've been waiting anxiously for it to arrive. Anyway, there are about 50 lessons in this book / audio and I'm hoping to go through 2 – 3 per day. I'm sure I'll pick up some cool vocab and get some essential grammar practice, but the main reason I bought it was so I can try this [shadowing](#) method that I've hear so much about. I'm hoping that by focusing on this for the next month and half, that I'll be able to really improve my pronunciation and intonation. I'll let you know. If anyone has any experience using this method, let me know.

Baron Jon

[How Trying to Understand a Language Can Keep You From Understanding the Language](#)

30 Tuesday Oct 2012

Posted by [baronjon](#) in [Mandarin Challenge](#), [Zero To Fluent](#)

≈ [3 Comments](#)



One of the biggest obstacles to understanding a language is trying to understand the language.

I think one of the biggest obstacles in learning a language is the temptation to translate everything you hear into your native language. This is something I faced very early in this challenge. I would listen to a dialogue, however basic, and would be paralyzed by every sentence until I knew and understood every word within it. It was exhausting and incredibly inefficient.

The Problem with Translating

But the problem with translating goes much deeper than just being an inefficient approach. The real problem is that even if you got really good at recognizing the language, even if your vocabulary grew substantially, you could still suffer with keeping up with normal speech due to the engrained tendency to translate every sound in your head. I've experienced this when I tried to learn Spanish in the past and no matter how much I knew, I was always struggling to keep up. So when I noticed myself doing the same thing in Chinese, I knew I had to find a better way.

Are you planning to be a u.n. translator someday?

"Are you planning to be a U.N. translator some day? No? Then stop translating!" I can't remember where I read that statement or who said it. But it instantly hit me as being relevant to my problem. Not even native speakers translate every word they hear. It's not necessary for anyone outside of a professional translator to understand every word spoken. And a professional translator won't learn how to translate a language when they are learning the language, because translating is a task to learn all on its own.

One of the hardest things I've attempted to do during this challenge is to listen for the meaning of the phrase and be ok with missing a word. With my vocabulary still being limited, sometimes the word I'm missing is the word I really need to know to understand the statement being spoken. But that's the only time I'll ask for clarification. Other times I'll just let the word float away into Chinese oblivion. Even for words I should know, if I can't immediately recall it's meaning, then I force myself to stop trying to remember it and return my focus to the words being spoken now. Often times the context in the remainder of the statement will make me remember what the word actually meant. In contrast, focusing on the word would have caused me to miss the rest of the conversation completely.

It's tough to do, but this has been incredibly helpful in my comprehension of the language. I still have a long way to go, but I wanted to share this since it has helped me.

What do you do to improve comprehension?

Today

Worked from 9-6:00pm

Vocab review : 1 hour

Grammar / Sentence review : 90 minutes

Skype with Native speaker : 1 hour

ChinesePod.com 2 hours

total 5.5 hours

What Does Your Language Sounds Like to a Non Native Speaker

28 Sunday Oct 2012

Posted by [baronjon](#) in [Zero To Fluent](#)

≈ [2 Comments](#)

What does your native language sound like to a foreigner? I admit, I haven't really thought about this before. But I've learned during this challenge that there are so many different facets to learning a new language. We all know how important vocabulary is and there's certainly no shortage of people out there who hold great pronunciation to be *the* most important thing in learning a language . But what about intonation ?

Intonation: The Hidden Gem of Language Learning

I think I've always know what intonation is, but I don't think I ever knew just how important it was to language learning until I started learning Chinese. Although I respect Chinese tones enough to always attempt to say them correctly, perfect pronunciation has not been my main focus. The main goal of the first two months of this challenge remains the same: understand and be understood. But on November 11th (beginning of month 3) I will begin to focus more heavily on sounding better when I speak. I'm still not aiming to be perfect, but I want to sound more natural than I do now.

I've been searching the interwebs for methods to improve pronunciation and I came across the video above. It's interesting because it can easily fool a native speaker (who isn't paying close attention) to believe that the video is english. This is because the melodic tone and intonation of the syllables are that of English even though the words are clearly not. Every language has its melody, its stresses, rises and falls. Learning how to naturally produce these can sometimes be more important than learning the perfect pronunciation of the word. I think this video shows that clearly.

Shadowing and Other Methods

I've found the youtube channel of Professor Arguelles where he discusses his method of shadowing. It seems like a fascinating, although perhaps difficult, way of improving one's ability to get a good intonation and decent accent in the foreign language they're learning.

So finally, my question is this: If you've spent time learning a second language, how did you go about improving your intonation and accent? Having time with the language is a given and listening a lot is also something that I think is universally agreed upon. But does anyone have experience with any other methods including shadowing? I would love to hear about them.

Today's Break down

Off of work

2 hours going over vocab

1 hour learning new vocab

3 hours listening to ChinesePod.com

1 hour reviewing Sentences / Grammar

Tsunamis and Taking the Time to Make Good Mnemonics

28 Sunday Oct 2012

Posted by [baronjon](#) in [Zero To Fluent](#)

≈ [6 Comments](#)

Tags

[Tsunamis](#), [vocab acquisition](#)

I've lived in some pretty cool places. Florida, New York City and now Hawaii. In addition to being known for cool attractions like Mickey mouse, Statue of Liberty and great beaches, each of these places are also known for receiving their fair share of natural disasters. I've been pretty responsible in the past. When going through the bleak white snow storms of New York, or the car slinging winds of Florida hurricanes, I've always had one thing on mind: Safety. It's like they say, *safety is no accident*. Hah! See what I did there? No? Nevermind then. Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes. Single minded, responsible and safety first. Well last night, I experienced my first major tsunami warning for Hawaii. People were freaking out and everyone was trying to do the "oh my gawd I forgot to buy groceries for the end of the world." routine. It was just like old times. But there was something slightly different this time and I think it directly stems from

intense language learning. This time, instead of immediately rushing to the grocery store for food, instead of calling every friend I had to tell them of the impending doom, I pulled out my iPhone, opened up my dictionary app and tried to figure out how to say tsunami in Chinese. I'm not proud of it. But that's what happened.

Since this brings my total learned words to 1119, I wanted to take a second to talk about vocab acquisition. It's one of my least favorite things to do. I wish I could just hear a word once and never forget it. Sigh, where are those matrix plugins?

If someone has a cool trick or process for acquiring large amounts of vocab, please share it with me.

The process described below is a quote from [benny's](#) page and it's what I've been using so far.

Why 'mùbiāo' means "target"

This is a word I used often enough, because every week I had a particular goal I was aiming for, such as trying to [get used to Skype conversations in a different accent](#). But how to remember it?

It's just a case of using your imagination! Think about it for a second and see what you could come up with from "moo" (falling tone) then "bee-ow" (first tone – not falling or rising), and see if you can tie that story into the concept of "target".

Throw any idea out there that comes to mind! It doesn't matter how silly, nonsensical, politically incorrect, sexual or personal to your tastes it may be. When I first saw it, I gave it a minute and then this story came to me:

I'm walking through a field with a bow and arrow in the early evening as the sun is setting. I want to practise my shooting skills, but don't see something challenging to aim for. Suddenly a cow falls from the sky! MOOOooooooooo [CRASH].

She stumbles to find her ground, and I see my opportunity! Conveniently, a bulls-eye of concentric red and white circles has been pre-painted on her rear, and I position myself by kneeling a little so that the bow is at the same height as the poor cow's ass.

*This is no ordinary bow and arrow though! My arrow is made entirely of bees. I pull it back and launch it into the air – since I positioned myself correctly it flies straight into the **target** and goes up the cow's bum! The poor animal forgets itself rather than moo she can't resist but yelling a loud "OW!!!"*

[No animals were harmed in the making of this mnemonic]

The story takes a couple of minutes to write out, but our brains work much faster than that when we don't need to verbalise it. Basically all I see in this story is [target: mu (falling tone), bee-ow (first tone): target]. The visual aspect of it also helps me remember the tones, and making sure

that the actual meaning is ever present allows it to be practical for **both** recognition AND for production.

It's essential that I understand it when I hear it *as well as* being able to produce the word myself at the drop of a hat.

Someone falling wouldn't actually be yelling in the falling tone (in Chinese it sounds more like a strict "No!" than a NOoooooo) but the point is that in all of my Chinese mnemonics there is either a stagnant/immobile/flat etc. aspect for the first tone, rising of some sort for the second tone, bouncing for the third and falling for the fourth. Neutral is not moving as much as it is in a state of boredom; this is less common though

I can say that this process works really well. Once you've gone over the word a few times, it becomes really cemented in your head. There's words that I haven't heard or seen since I started this challenge but when I need to recall them or hear them, I instantly remember them. It's a really great way to learn words because the mnemonics quickly disappear and when you hear the word, you don't have to translate it in your head, you just know it.

The one downside is the time it takes to create a mnemonic for a new word. It's not super long. Usually on 2 or three minutes. But when trying to learn 30-50 words a day, I can easily spend 90 minutes just making good mnemonics. The words stick so the method is definitely worth it. But I would love to hear how you guys are acquiring vocab.

[My Typical Day and How I Balance Work and Language Learning.](#)

26 Friday Oct 2012

Posted by [baronjon](#) in [Uncategorized](#), [Zero To Fluent](#)

≈ [1 Comment](#)

Tags

[Study tactics](#), [Typical Day](#)

Do I have a job? *Yes!* I most certainly do. Like most people, I dream of being able devote my entire day to working on my passion for languages but that unfortunately has not happened. But I've found that it is possible (at least most of the time) to balance work, family life, and language learning if you plan well. So I wanted to post what today and any other normal day looks like for me.

Work schedule for the day 8am – 5pm (I sometimes work nights)

- Alarm goes off at 4:29 am. I really want to hit the snooze button. But I remind myself that 90 days will be here very soon and that I'll be able to sleep in at that point.

- 4:45 am – 6:15 am Create mnemonics for vocab that I learned the previous night. (I find it best to do this in the morning because it's a pretty tedious task and can make me fall to sleep if I do it at night.)
- 6:30 am to 7:20 am – Grammar acquisition. This is basically me going through my grammar book and copying sentences and patterns into my SRS app.

shower and stuff

- 8 am – 5 pm : Work (Aka the Chinese Game) During the course of a day, I'm constantly trying to think in Chinese. When someone says something to me in English I think, "how do I say that in Chinese". When I see a traffic light, or a baseball hat I think "How do I say this in Chinese? This is tough because I'm not allowed to have my study materials with me to look up a word. Every now and then I'll pull out my phone and look something up. But it's mostly me just trying use the words I know to say something close to what I'm thinking.
- I get two 15 minute breaks and a 1 hour lunch. The 15 minute breaks are perfect for studying the Chinese mnemonics I made for the vocab that morning. The hour lunch consists of me eating (of course) and me going through sentence drills.
- 5 pm – 6 pm. Get off work and commute home. Listen to whatever Chinese material I can get my hands on. Even If I can't understand it all.
- 6-8 pm Have dinner with my lovely wife and do whatever she wants to do. Watch tv, talk, whatever. She works early mornings so she will usually work out at 8pm and then go to bed. I don't think spending two hours with one you love will always be enough. So I make sure to plan a date night for one of our days off.
- 8-10 pm Skype sessions with native speaker
- 10 – 11:30pm listen to ChinesePod.com and note any new vocab for the next morning.

Total Study time : Approximately 7 hours.

Seems a lot. But it's like I've said before, It's only for 90 days. After that, you can continue studying the language on a much less intense level. Oh and something that I've found to be really important. Take it easy on yourself. Doing a schedule like this will certainly cause you get tired. Allow yourself to take a rest when you need it. This journey should be fun.

How do yo plan your day / week?

Learning more than one language at the same time

by [Luca Lampariello](#) on Jan 2, 2012 • 11:25 [78 Comments](#)

[27](#)



English

A question most people ask me on my Blog and YouTube channel is the following: “Is it possible to learn more than one language at the same time, and if so, how should I go about doing it?” Well, the answer is yes, it is possible to learn more than one language at the same time. But, before I give tips and guidance on doing this, I want to share a few of my thoughts on this interesting topic.

Until recently, I never felt the need to learn more than one language at a time. Now that I think about it, my strict “one language only” approach was mainly for three reasons: (1) I was never in a hurry to learn languages; (2) once I chose a language, I was so involved in the learning process that I had no desire to deal with others; and (3) learning only one language at a time gave me the opportunity to polish the ones I previously learned. Now, I’ll discuss these factors in detail.

1. Haste is your enemy

The modern world is obsessed with a “here-and-now” compulsion which is particularly harmful to language learning. It is no wonder that in Italian, as well as in many other languages, a long series of proverbs exist on the pernicious effects that haste has on our lives. For example, “Haste

is a bad counselor,” “Slow and steady wins the race,” and so on. The first six months of the learning process are the most delicate, and one needs to focus on a given language daily and dedicate to it **quality work**. Time is a luxury that modern men lack, so if you split it between two, three, or even four different activities, the quality of your learning will suffer. Therefore, I personally recommend learning one language at a time.

2. Building a language core

The language learning process involves the use and memorization of words, structures, and sounds; however, **emotions, colors, images, and memories** are also involved and contribute to what I call a “language core.” Acquiring this language core is extremely important if one wants to keep the language alive in their head, even long after not having used it. Moreover, it takes time to build a language core, so attempting to speed through the learning process with multiple languages can cause language cores to overlap, or simply prevent even one from forming.

3. Optimizing your time

Picking up a new language doesn’t prevent one from keeping and even refining the ones he previously learned and are obviously at a higher level. The trick is having good time management skills. By trial and error, you want to find a sustainable schedule to learn languages.

The two students’ race

In order to better illustrate what I mean by “managing one’s time,” here’s a story I call “The Two Students’ Race.” Two students (both Italian) decide to compete for a challenging and ambitious goal: learning ten foreign languages. The judges give them a ten year “time budget,” and the rest is up to them.

Student A decides that he will pick up two languages every two years. He starts by learning English and Spanish. At the end of the two years, he picks up French and German. While learning French and German, he enjoys conversing with native speakers in both English and Spanish, languages he now speaks with a certain level of fluency. He also loves reading books. By the end of the fourth year, he is relatively fluent in German and French, so he starts learning Portuguese and Swedish. At the same time, he moves to Paris where he gets the chance to use the four languages he learned and continue to actively learn Portuguese and Swedish. At the beginning of the sixth year, he decides to learn Mandarin and Romanian. Two years later, he finally picks up Japanese and Dutch. Then ten years later, when time is up, he speaks English, Spanish, French, and German fluently; Portuguese, Swedish, Mandarin and Romanian well; and Japanese and Dutch decently. He has weak languages, but he reached the admirable goal of **building a core** in more than five languages. Moreover, he will never forget these five languages. He could get rusty in them, but they will quickly come back to him.

Student B goes for the same languages, but opts for a completely different strategy—he starts learning the ten languages all at the same time. Over the years, he lacks the consistency and

patience to hold onto all the languages he is learning. Sometimes he learns five, sometimes six or seven, but never ten per day. He might have brought some languages to a good level, but for the most part, his languages are at a basic level. He confuses languages such as Italian and Spanish, and Dutch and German. Many of his languages are destined to regress to a very basic level because the student did not build a linguistic core for any language.

Now, the example is a bit extreme, but it gives you the general idea. People delude themselves into thinking that doing multiple things at the same time will accelerate the learning process when, in fact, it damages the learning process. Remember the story of the tortoise and the hare? Well, be the tortoise. Patience and aiming for a long-term goal will bring you success.

Tips and guidance for learning multiple languages at the same time

For the last 20 years, I was similar to Student A in that I picked up a new language every two years while refining the ones I knew. Now, I learn two languages every two years, while refining the ones I know. So, although I suggest learning one language at a time, if you decide to take on this “multi-language challenge,” make sure you have the following:

- A fair amount of time to dedicate to language learning
- Willpower
- Some experience in language learning
- Good time management skills

Guidelines

If you decide to take on this “multi-language challenge,” here are some useful tips.

- 1) Choose a maximum of **TWO languages** at any given time. Three languages is excessive and will impair whatever language core you’re trying to build.
- 2) Choose two languages that are **distinct from each other**. Languages that are similar can overlap by way of words, grammar, emotions, memories, and other factors, thereby causing confusion. Therefore, learning Spanish AND Italian, Dutch AND German, or Portuguese AND Romanian at the same time is not a good idea.
- 3) Try to choose an “**easy**” language and a relatively “**difficult**” one (I explain this concept both in [English](#) and [Spanish](#) on YouTube)
- 4) If you choose two languages that are at fairly opposite ends of the complexity scale, give the difficult language **70-80%** of your budgeted time, and give the “easy” one **20-30%** of your budgeted time.
- 5) Study both languages **every day**.

Well... I speak 3 languages like a native (Arabic, Armenian & English)...Spanish fluently... & now I'm learning Hebrew & Spanish...

My advice is if u want to learn two languages all at once u should learn languages which don't have lots of similarities... Like I'm doing Spanish & Hebrew! They aren't alike AT ALL!

But I wanted to learn Spanish & Portuguese THAT DIDN'T WORK! coz they're so much alike : [

For example Bulgarian & Serbian aren't very different, but bulgarian & Arabic ARE different!

Studying Multiple Languages Simultaneously

I've been working on my French & German Comparative Tutorial this week, and also searching the internet to find other sites that help people learn more than one language at a time. I am so disappointed.

I've found a few vocabulary lists, but they're mostly just showing the similarities among Romance languages. I can't find any sites that include lessons for learning two languages, closely related or not. I've never been able to find books like this either, which is somewhat surprising considering that almost all graduate students must learn two foreign languages and I know I am not the only person in the world who studies French, German and Italian at the same time. Where's the multilingual love?

Instead, all I'm finding is some misguided "advice" that learning two languages at once is a bad idea. Says who? Every single person learns in a different way. Maybe it's a good idea and maybe it's not, but you should at least try. Maybe you can learn as a beginner in two languages without confusing them, or maybe you need to be advanced in one but beginning in the other. It all depends on your learning style.

I took Intermediate French, Beginning German and Beginning Spanish when I was an undergrad and I never had a problem keeping the languages straight in my head. Apparently this is discouraged (!) at some American universities, like Georgetown: "Freshmen interested in pre-registering for multiple language courses must receive permission from the dean's office. One of the deans will discuss your specific situation with you and help you determine whether or not studying a second foreign language is feasible." You have to get permission to study languages?? How can studying a second foreign language ever be NOT feasible?? I. just. don't. get. it. Quite a difference from French high schools, where students must learn two languages!

Of course, if you're advanced enough in one language, you can always use it to learn another, i.e. learn German *in* French or learn Italian *in* Spanish. That's precisely what I do when I buy language books here in France. I feel like I get two languages for the price of one. Even the cheap *cahiers* (usually no more than 5 € each) designed for collège-level students are useful for getting the grammar basics of German, Italian, Spanish and sometimes even Latin. LaRousse, Hachette, Magnard, and Hatier Chouette are all good ones.

Anyway, since I want to spread the multiple language love, here are some new resources that I've come across this week:

- Pukka German is a podcast of informal German (slang, idioms, colloquialisms) from an adorable South African-German couple who live in Freiburg. It's extremely useful since it's the German that is not included in textbooks, i.e. the way people actually speak!
- I love U of Texas-Austin's Français Interactif multimedia program for beginning French students, so I was really happy to see that they're working on a German program too. So far, only the Grimm Grammar guide is up, but the rest of the program should be up this fall, called Deutsch im Blick. They also have an Italian program, but it's for intermediate to advanced students: Radio Arlecchino. AND they have other projects in Spanish Proficiency Exercises and Brazilian Portuguese Pronunciation for Speakers of Spanish. I wish more universities would produce language materials like these!
- Deutschlern.net is a free Deutsch als Fremdsprache site with online interactive exercises. It's all in German, which can be a bit intimidating if you're a beginner.
- Since there's no amazon.it, I searched around for online Italian bookstores where I can buy Italian as a Second Language books. I managed to find two, Internet Bookstore Italia and Libreria Universitaria, but shipping outside of Italy is not cheap.
- Rai International's Dentro l'Italiano is an elementary Italian course for foreigners. It has audiovisual components similar to the BBC's language resources.

Pour les francophones qui veulent apprendre l'allemand :

- allemandfacile.com
- Allemand & Informatique pour apprenants & enseignants

Pour les francophones qui veulent apprendre l'italien :

- italien-facile.com
- Cours de langue italienne

There are other facile.com sites for learning Spanish, Dutch, Japanese, Latin and even Provençal! (The English version of the site only includes lessons for French, Spanish and German.)

So if anyone else can find free online tutorials in learning two languages together (not necessarily just French & German or French & Italian), please let me know!

[How Many Languages Is It Possible to Learn?](#)

Posted on September 6, 2008 by Ryan

After watching the Olympics and the amazing feats of people like [Michael Phelps](#) it makes me reconsider what is possible for people to achieve. How fast can human beings swim; how fast can we run; how much weight can we lift? Similarly, it wouldn't be strange for any linguist to wonder how many languages a human being could learn in the course of a lifetime.

It's a Bigger Number than You Think

[John Bowring](#) was a British literary translator, economist, politician and diplomat whose service included being the fourth governor of Hong Kong. He claimed that he knew 200 languages and that he could speak 100 of them. Cardinal [Joseph Caspar Mezzofanti](#) knew more than 70 languages and could speak 38 without ever having left his homeland: Italy. In our day, the Brazilian linguist [Dr. Carlos do Amaral Freire](#) claims to know over 100 languages and the Lebanese language instructor [Ziad Fazah](#) claims 59. [This article](#) has information regarding great hyperpolyglots of the past and [this article](#) has information about the great polyglots that are still with us. You may find these numbers hard to believe but each one of these hyperpolyglots has publications or video recordings that suggest that their claims are true.

What Is Speaking a Language?

I used to naively think that this meant being able to say anything in the foreign language and in your own native language. That would mean that if you couldn't explain how to change a carburetor, the difference between socialism and communism or the steps to buying a house in your target language, without making any obvious grammatical or pronunciation mistakes, then you couldn't really say that you spoke it. That seems to be a bit demanding since there are many monolinguals that have a hard time doing that well in their own native language.

Even so, I get very annoyed with people who learn a dozen phrases in five languages and try to pass themselves off as cultured polyglots. I don't think that we should claim to speak a language unless we can at least deal with native speakers well enough to say: *I'm sorry. What is a wiggetybunket? I've never heard that word before.* and then be able to understand the native speaker's simple explanation. We should also be able to pronounce words well enough for native speakers to be able to understand almost every word we say. Lastly, we should have a good enough understanding of the grammar/structure of the language to form original sentences that are at least mostly correct. If you have a higher level of proficiency then so much the better. Qualifying the number of languages you speak is always a good idea. Statements like, *I speak two fluently and am conversational in four others* or, *I know four and have studied eight* are good examples of how to honestly portray your language abilities.

Studying, Forgetting and Remembering

Bowring and Mezzofanti died over 200 years ago but I have had the opportunity to personally deal with Freire and Fazah, as well as with a few other truly great linguists, and I imagine that the former pair were something like the latter. First of all, both Freire and Fazah have studied many languages that they have had no occasion to use in decades. They both admit that speaking them with no prior notice would be very difficult. Freire describes these languages as being *deactivated*. The curious thing is that they both claim that they can *reactivate* these languages after a few days of study. This means that if you were to drop them in Istanbul tomorrow and ask them to give a speech to an audience of locals they would probably struggle greatly with the task. If you were to give them a week's notice they would probably receive praise for how well they spoke Turkish.

How Many Languages Is It Possible to Have a High Level of Fluency In?

That is what many people would really like to know. How many languages can you speak with near native fluency in and have an enormous vocabulary in? To date my experience has taught me that this number has everything to do with your lifestyle. If you have a life that not only gives you the opportunity but also necessitates that or greatly benefits from knowing thirteen languages well then you will probably speak thirteen languages well. If you have a very monolingual lifestyle then even maintaining one other language will most likely be quite difficult.

Limitless Possibilities

What if you studied a new language until you were proficient in it and then switched to another for ten years? Let's say you're not Mezzofanti and *only* became proficient in four languages during that time. Then *life happens* and you don't touch the languages for another ten years. Your languages will have become quite *deactivated* but as soon as you choose to pick up an old book in one of them or spend more than a day or two in a country that speaks that language you will find that it all starts to come back to you. Will your time have been wasted all of those years ago? Only if being able to get around in a foreign country without the help of a third party is not enjoyable for you; only if reading good literature in its original form has no value; only if learning foreign languages is not enjoyable for you.

How many languages can humans learn? They learn as many as they have time to study and practice. Scientists have yet to find any biological reason why everyone cannot learn twenty languages or even one hundred. Linguists like Bowring, Mezzofanti, Freire and Fazah suggest that our abilities are much greater than we think. As it is with so many things in life, we often become our greatest limitation or our greatest asset. Our attitudes, lifestyles, habits, practices, interests, hobbies, etc. are what usually what determine what we can achieve much more than our physical or mental capacity.